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Harman, Kerry (2018) Self-construction and social transformation: lifelong, lifewide and life-deep learning. [Book Review]

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Book Review

Kerry Harman

Belanger, P. (2016). *Self-construction and Social Transformation: Lifelong, Lifewide and Life-Deep Learning*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

This is a book worth reading for those interested in social justice, equality and education. Belanger tackles this topic by examining the ways broader social change and transformation are interrelated with changing conceptions of self. In a nutshell, the thesis is that humans need to gain an understanding of 'self' as active agents in order to effect social change and transformation. For Belanger, this happens through a 'gradual process of self-construction' whereby 'individuals become increasingly capable of steering their own course through life' (p. 48).

The book is divided into three parts. The first part lays out a theoretical argument which points to a subjective dimension of learning and an understanding of learning as 'self-construction'. Belanger refers to this as the 'intimacy of learning' and argues this concept provides a way of overcoming the ongoing separation of public-private, cognitive-emotive and individual-social, when theorising learning. The second part develops this thesis by looking at various 'educational domains', for example, learning at work, literacy learning, learning of post-retirement adults and popular education. This section illustrates the case that learning is 'lifelong', 'lifewide' and 'life-deep'. The third part of the book provides recommendations for educational policy, programmes and practices which are underpinned by an understanding of learning as taking place in formal educational institutions *as well as* other settings. The overarching goal of policy and practice for Belanger is that it should contribute to developing an understanding of 'self' as active in social change and transformation.

The book provides an excellent introduction to issues, theories and debates in the field of lifelong learning and will be of particular interest to researchers exploring the relationships between education and democracy. Furthermore, many of the citations were from books and articles written in French, which provides an introduction to non-French speakers to a set of literature they may not have previously encountered. However, the lack of reference to literature published after 2010 results in various limitations, including an absence of relevant literature theorising the interrelationships between individual and social dimensions of learning. For example, there is no mention of literature examining learning from a sociomaterial approach and this omission contributes to making the chapter on learning at work feel somewhat dated. It has also resulted in a lack of discussion on more contemporary work issues such the gig-economy and zero hour contracts, transnational labour and poorly paid jobs, and the ongoing increase in the retirement age in countries with aging populations, which arguably challenges Belanger's argument that broad social changes are requiring individuals to become more autonomous.

Furthermore, Belanger uses concepts such as 'autonomy', 'self-direction' and 'reflection' to develop the notion of the intimacy of learning and in so doing remains tied to overly individualised and cognitivist understandings of learning. There is an assumption that self-construction is something conscious and directed by the individual. For example, he describes the way the 'self' is constructed as: 'the tension between the construction of one's identity for others and of one's identity for oneself' (p. 237). Moreover, in claiming that 'inner density' and 'personal expertise' are 'preconditions for freedom of thought and for creative participation in collective action' (p. 246), he seems to say that you need to be able to steer your own life course in order to be able to act collectively to bring about social change. This means that less conscious learning processes such as embodiment are overlooked, which poses a problem for his argument that 'self-construction' is necessarily linked with democracy.

Regardless of the limitations, the book raises very important questions in relation to education and democracy and provides an excellent overview of the field of lifelong learning. Furthermore, the recommendations provide an important reminder to policymakers on the benefits of conceiving education more broadly than what happens in schools and universities. Belanger is strongest when he moves away from a focus on autonomy and self-direction to the development of the capacity to act collectively to bring about social change and it is this element in the book that is most interesting.